
Decision Memo

Verizon Solar Array

Aldrich Mountain Communications Site

USDA Forest Service

Blue Mountain Ranger District, Malheur National Forest
Grant County, Oregon

Background

Aldrich Mountain Communications Site is located in Section 11, T. 14 S., R. 27 E., WM, at approximately Latitude 44° 22' 38" North, Longitude 119° 27' 02" West. The elevation is 6990 feet above mean sea level. Aldrich Mountain Communications Site is road accessible.

The site was first developed for fire detection by Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) in 1934 with the construction of a fire lookout facility that also served to house communication equipment for various state, federal and private entities. In 1985, the site was designated as a Forest Communications Site in a Forest-wide Environmental Assessment for Identification of Sites for Electronic Communication Facility Development. Further communications development has occurred since with the installation of two communication towers, a facility building, a generator building and a 12,000-gallon propane tank. The site continues to serve as a key communications site for various state, federal and private entities for the area.

Decision

I have decided to approve a permit for Cello Partnership d/b/a Verizon Wireless to add ~65' of new solar panels (15 panel sections ~ 4' x 6') with associated footers to the existing communication site's solar power system in order to reduce dependence upon the existing 12,000-gallon propane/generator system.

The following project designs are required under this decision.

- In order to comply with Objective 11 of the Aldrich Communication Site Management Plan to "maintain visual resource objectives by requiring design standards that are unobtrusive and by utilizing earth tone colors and non-reflective surface material consistent with the standards in the Land and Resource Management Plan." The Aldrich Communication Site is located within the foreground viewshed of Forest Road 2150 which has a visual quality objective of partial retention within the Dry Cabin Wildlife Emphasis Area (MA20). The proposed installation shall be designed so that any structures are evident but not obvious to observers by incorporating the below criteria into the design. This concern was shared by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation archaeologist.

- Minimize ground disturbance and vegetation removal. Retain as much existing rock formations and vegetation as possible. Re-vegetate cut and fill slopes with native vegetation as soon as possible after construction. Cut and fill slopes should be contoured as to repeat the form of the surrounding landscape to the greatest extent possible. Grading material shall not be cast off. Any excess soil can be used as fill material or removed from the site.
 - Site the panels in such a way to avoid a continuous line in order to minimize the straight-line effect. A cluster of panels is less obvious visually than a straight line. Offsetting them in groups could minimize this effect while allowing for the solar gain needed. Final panel locations shall be pre-approved by the Authorized Officer prior to installation.
 - Color selection must have written pre-approval of the Authorized Officer and chosen to be as inconspicuous as possible when viewed from a distance in order to reduce or eliminate glare from reflective surfaces. The best color options are those cooler and darker colors found within the shadows of the landscape. A dark galvanization process (via multi-dipping), or surface treatment (<https://www.natina.com/services/steel/>) on all metal pipes and supports will result in a darker and less reflective surface.
- Soil, gravel and rock sources shall be weed free and pre-approved by Forest Service minerals or botany staff prior to haul onto National Forest System lands.
 - All equipment shall be power washed and cleaned of any potential noxious weed seed and the permit holder shall coordinate an equipment inspection with the Forest prior to entering National Forest system Lands.
 - All work shall be performed to minimize ground disturbance and when conditions allow without creating adverse resource issues or rutting. If work is required to be performed during adverse weather or wet ground conditions, the permit holder shall obtain written pre-approval from the Blue Mountain District Ranger. Depending on conditions, additional mitigation measures may be required.
 - All disturbance shall be located within the previously disturbed site area with final panel installation locations as pre-approved in the field by the Forest Service.
 - Final construction disturbance shall be recontoured to ensure run-off does not concentrate or contribute to future erosional issues.
 - The permit holder shall be responsible for locating and protecting any marked or unmarked, known/unknown, underground improvements (ex: lines/cables) from disturbance activities. The permit holder shall be responsible for immediate repairs to pre-damage conditions at their own expense. There is a known/unmarked buried propane line from the small propane tank located at the public parking area that runs to the Fire Lookout.
 - If during project activities historic or prehistoric artifacts are encountered all activities shall cease immediately and a Forest Service Heritage specialist shall be contacted to evaluate the discovery.
 - If helicopter transport is needed (for material or personnel transport, etc.) to the project site, restrictions may be in effect (restrictions on flight disturbance during bighorn sheep lambing and/or deer and elk calving periods: April 1 through July 15).

Reason for Categorical Exclusion

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable category of actions is identified in agency procedures as: Approval, modification, or continuation of special uses that require less than 5 acres of NFS lands” (36 CFR 220.6(e)(3)).

I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

- ◆ Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.
 - No TES wildlife or Critical Habitat within project area or Forest Service sensitive species within or near (<0.5 mi) project area.
 - No TES fish or Critical habitat are near the project area.
 - No TES or FS sensitive plants or their habitats occur in the project area.
- ◆ Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds – There are no floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds in the vicinity of the proposed action. The nearest waterbody is .5 miles away.
- ◆ Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas – The project area is not within a congressionally designated area.
- ◆ Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas – The project area is not within an inventoried roadless area or a potential wilderness area.
- ◆ Research natural areas – no research natural areas within the project area.
- ◆ American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites – No known American Indian religious or cultural sites. Tribal consultation was conducted via letters mailed on July 10, 2020 to Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation, and Burns Paiute Tribe. Email and telephone discussion occurred between Forest Tribal liaison representative and Umatilla Confederated Tribes cultural resources department discussing glare from solar panels. The visual project design criteria was provided to CTUIR address concerns.
- ◆ Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas – No National Register eligible sites affected. SHPO was competed under 2004 Programmatic Agreement

Public Involvement

This action was originally listed as a proposal on the Summer 2020 Malheur National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions. Email notification of the request to update the power source from the applicant was sent to all facility and site users on June 29, 2020.



Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision is consistent with the Malheur National Forest Land Management Plan. The project was designed in conformance with the Land Management Area 19: Administrative Sites and adjacent management areas of MA 10 Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized Recreation Areas and MA 20A Dry Cabin Wildlife Emphasis Area. Reducing reliance on propane will reduce wildlife disturbance from propane delivery trucks throughout the year.

Implementation Date

This project may begin immediately.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Stacia Kimbell, Realty Specialist, Malheur National Forest, 431 Patterson Bridge Road, John Day, OR 97845, (541) 575-3349, stacia.kimbell@usda.gov

CRAIG TRULOCK
Forest Supervisor

Date

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